



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY



June 13, 2010

Under a Withering Sun, Spill Cleanup Workers Must Break Frequently

By MIREYA NAVARRO

GRAND ISLE, La. — On a beach where the sea breeze reeks of [oil](#), about a dozen workers stoically shoveled contaminated sand into plastic bags on a recent afternoon, while others lolled on chairs and beverage coolers under a white tent nearby, chatting and dozing against the tent's poles.

But there was a logic to the latter group's inactivity. Cleanup crews have come up against a foe even more unyielding than the spill in the Gulf of Mexico: the heat.

Officials with BP, which is responsible for the cleanup, say that the gulf region's soaring temperatures have slowed the work because of added measures to protect more than 18,000 workers on land and at sea across four states from the scorching sun.

With the heat index, a measure of how hot it feels when humidity is taken into account, at 110 degrees or more in some locales, at least 100 workers have had heat-related illnesses, some of which required hospitalization, said David Michaels, assistant secretary for the [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#) at the Department of Labor.

Mr. Michaels said the department had assigned more than 20 inspectors from OSHA to watch over workers on boats and beaches and at about 20 cleanup staging areas from Louisiana to Florida.

"This is potentially a life-threatening situation," he said. "OSHA has been concerned about this from the very start. I'm not saying that BP is doing a terrible job, but we're concerned and we're

vigilant.”

The most vulnerable are the workers on beaches like the one on this barrier island, some 112 miles south of New Orleans. Parts of the seven-mile beach, lined with vacation homes on stilts, resemble military construction sites, with snaking orange booms, portable restrooms and cruising Bobcat loaders and National Guard Humvees.

Out in the open, workers in groups of 10 to 15 — mostly men but also a few women — labored in white protective suits or T-shirts and jeans and accessories like sunglasses, straw or floppy hats, plastic gloves and rubber boots.

Depending on temperatures and whether the workers wear the bulkier protective clothing needed for handling oil, they may work for 20 minutes and rest for 40, or the other way around, a BP spokesman, Ray Viator, said.

Security personnel prevented reporters from approaching workers on the beach, but some of them, approached later, said they were able to cope with the heat because of the long breaks and the availability of water and sports drinks. Some said they drank up to 30 bottles a day.

“You need it,” a 21-year-old worker from Raceland in Lafourche Parish said on his way to his motel room after his shift. (He declined to be identified out of concern that he might jeopardize his cleanup job.) “I’m used to the heat, but it’s so hot that in 20 minutes you’re exhausted. One day, we worked for 15 minutes and took a break for 45. They said the heat index was 116.”

All the same, the sight of workers resting under canopies has caused some grumbling among residents angered by the loss of beaches, fishing, seafood and livelihoods.

Thomas Himel, 51, a home improvement contractor who was painting a beachfront home near the cleanup operations here, said he had run into workers who “actually care about the situation and how it’s hurting us” and others who he felt were taking advantage of the disaster.

“They already have people with itchy eyes,” he said, suggesting that some workers were weighing personal injury lawsuits. “Some people are fully into that.”

The health risks from the heat alone are undisputed, said Laura Leckett, a nurse with West Jefferson Medical Center in Marrero, La., who has been running a first-aid tent here since May

31. Ms. Leckett said she had treated about 50 of the workers for heat-stress symptoms like headaches and muscle cramps.

“They feel sluggish,” she said. More serious symptoms can include rapid breathing, unresponsiveness and disorientation.

But some of the workers said the money they were making made the risks worthwhile.

A 28-year-old worker who said he had traveled here from Dallas said he was making \$15 an hour scooping up oil at sea.

The worker from Raceland, a technical school student, said he had worked here three weeks so far for \$12 an hour — enough to persuade him to postpone his studies so he could work on the cleanup for at least a year.

Still, he said, the gravity of the devastation is not lost on him.

“The more we clean it up, the more oil washes on the beach,” he said. “It’ll take more than just shovels.”